

Interview with

CINCO DE MAYO CELEBRATION PARTICIPANTS

5/5/90

AMERICAN G.I. FORUM, CASPER

by

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TRANSCRIBED on 2/6/94

The Forum is at 904 N. Center St. To my left is Johnny Pacheco who was born December 22, 1963 in Casper, Wyoming. He went to school in Midwest and graduated from there, went to Casper College where he is presently attending classes in radiology technology (X-Ray technician). He wants to be an oncologist and treat cancer patients. He comes from a big family, but he only has one sister in his immediate family. The man who takes care of this place is Joe Pacheco. Maria Moreno was born in Mexico on August 4, 1939. Her father came here to work. He worked cleaning buildings. She works in her home and takes care of her kids and grandkids. She has five kids. John has a son and is getting ready to be married. His son is Johnny Pacheco the third. Maria has been in Casper 25 years. She still has a good accent. David Villescas was born on November 14, 1968 in Chihuahua, Mexico in the country. He is working in a restaurant, Peking Restaurant. He is a cook. He comes from a family of seven kids, one sister, five brothers. Three are still in Mexico. He likes Casper. Johnny says the Forum has been here since 1968. It was downtown beneath the old Wyatt Hotel in downtown. It was in the basement. They moved to this place in 1974. Johnny is a bartender and helps with functions. It is only open on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

I ask Maria what Cinco de Mayo means to her. She answers in Spanish.

"It's a festival to celebrate the independence of Mexico." (interpretation by Helen Rodriguez) They celebrate it more in Mexico. Helen says: "Cinco de Mayo here is more Anglicized. It's like Fourth of July."

Johnny: "There's a lot of people that don't even understand. They just know that it's Cinco de Mayo. They don't know why. There's a lot of people that don't know that it's Mexican independence. They just grew up knowing that it's a Hispanic holiday and everybody celebrates. That's just the way it has been."

How did they celebrate it in Mexico? Maria answers. "They pick up the Mexican flag in Mexico and then they have dances a bunch of festivites, bunch of food, just people gathering, family-oriented. Hispanics, Mexicans, you know."
(Helen interprets for Maria and for David)

It is a national celebration. Denver has a big turnout compared to Casper. I ask Johnny if Cinco de Mayo relates to the Centennial. He says no, not at all. He thinks it's bad. I ask him if the Spanish heritage has been ignored. He says, yes, it's more recognized in Denver than in Wyoming. It's not recognized in Wyoming.

"Like they said, in Denver there are more Hispanic people. It's (Cinco de Mayo) more recognized than it is in the State of Wyoming. In fact, it's not recognized at all. There's no, kind of, celebrations, no parades, no anything. We're not recognized people, and this is the only way we can be recognized in some way is by this club. This combines all the Mexican people together, all the Hispanics, to show their celebration."

Helen says it's exasperating.

Helen Rodriguez: "It's exasperating, kind of makes you want to give up, and not give up either. Education's our freedom and freedom should be everybody's business. But we don't have enough clout here to hang in there together."

Maria says shes a citizen. Does she feel like she's in a minority that nobody cares about? She is in a minority, Helen translates: "We're a minority. We don't have that many here in Casper. There's not enough to make a dent anywhere. It's always the same ones. If you want to make a festivity or something, or hold something, it's usually the same ones. A lot of em don't want to even come to North Casper. They don't want to participate in American G.I. Forum. They look down on it."

I ask David what he likes best about G.I. Forum. "I like the music. I like to come over here and have a nice time, the people. It's like family. You all get together. You talk and you sing Jacillas(?) and you have a few beers and you dance and have a good time." (Helen translates)

Do they speak Spanish or English here? More Spanish, David says.

Johnny: "This is the only place in Casper that they can come with their friends and talk their language. They can speak Spanish here and be comfortable without being nervous about trying to talk in English. They can come in here and everything's Spanish, and have a good time and be good with their friends."

"It's why I like to come to here because I won't be embarrassed to talk to Mexican people because I can talk in Spanish" He's been here for about five years and has spoken English for about, or after about, six months (?)

Johnny, do the older people appreciate the heritage?

"Young people don't get involved at all. In fact, they're just, kind of, you know, I don't want to say, I'm being prejudiced. They're Americanized, you know. They just forgot their heritage at all. And I'm guilty of that too,

until I got involved here and kind of worked with it and seen it. But most of the older people like my uncle and Helen, these guys were here longer and started and know what it means more than I do, or any young people. It's hard to get em to get into it anymore. They just don't care."

"I learned a lot. We have a sign out there that explains how the G.I. Forum started and why we are doing this and what it means."

What is the purpose of it? Johnny says: "Dr. Hector Garcia is the founder. He founded it in 1948, I believe, because a Mexican-American soldier was not given the right for a proper burial, a military burial because he was a Mexican. He was denied that. And so Dr. Garcia thought that was wrong and fought for that, and started American G.I. Forum where all the Chicanos could get together and fight for things like that, the equality, not just for us but for everybody."

It was political to begin with but became social.

I ask Maria where she lives in Casper. She lives in North Casper. Helen says they look at North Casper as a barrio.

Helen: "They look at us as a barrio." Maria likes it, she says. She likes the community because we're all neighbors whether it's Blacks, Whites or Mexicans.

Do they have problems, fights? Not any more than anywhere else, says Johnny.

"It's about like anyplace else, you know. And that kind of bothers me, too, because people look at this place and don't want to come here cause they make a reputation on a place, and it's a nice place to come and get together."

1989-90 season was the first time the Forum had a pool team.

Helen: "This is the first time that the American G.I. Forum had a full team, this year, '89-90 season, the first time we had a pool team in there. They take turns going to different bars to play pool and a lot of the other bars were kind of nervous coming over here because they didn't know what to expect. And for so many stories, they say, "Hell, this is a pretty good bar." And I says, "I know it is. You let all this imagination go, and we're a pretty good club here, you know?"

Johnny: "That's television that does that to the people, makes em scared of the place. When you think of Mexican people you think of knives and guns and bad guys.... White people won't come here because they get nervous unless they've lived in this neighborhood and they know what this place is about."

Helen says they hardly get past the Chicken Coop. (A restaurant on north Center Street. What kind of people are here?

Johnny: "It's a variety. You got young people, old people and now we're gettin different races, Whites and Blacks come in here from all over, so you get a big mixture of people."

It's a healthy mix, I say. Do Hispanics have something to add to the community?

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"There's a lot that we can show the community that we can do. Cause we're hard-working and we like to help. We like to do things to make a community better, whether it's our neighborhood or the town or whatever."

I mention the Hispanic Santos exhibit. They tell me about the Humanities Council's project, La Cultura.

I ask David what his plans are? What does he want to do? He wants to make a place for his wife and son. He wants to stay here. Maria wants to stay. She loves it here. Her family is here. Johnny wants to stay in Casper and raise his family. Helen asks for my card and wants to send me some information.

Johnny doesn't speak much Spanish. His parents did not teach him Spanish because most people spoke English. Working at the Forum brings him back to his heritage. I give each person a card. I thank them for the talk. I tell them I would like to take pictures while they dance. The band is called, "Azteca." We go on with the conversation. David says sometimes his son asks how to say something in Spanish, cause he's learning English. He is three years old. David wants him to speak more Spanish as well as English. I record the music with door open, maybe while I'm picking up the equipment. The discussion is ended and I am going to dance with Helen Rodriguez, then take some photos of the dance at the Forum.

End of interview and taping at 26:20